

## Dunham: He's No Dummy

### Ventriloquist Jeff Dunham Puts Skeptics Behind Him To Become Puppet Master

Norwood Dunham, Locust Grove, OK, sent in this interesting article from the TULSA WORLD, in which Jeff Dunham headlined the Entertainment section on Sept. 16, 1994. We're not expecting to trace the ancestry of Peanut & Walter, but would any reader have an idea about how Jeff relates to the total Dunham picture? (See photo, page 2.)

By Natalie Nichols  
World Staff Writer

**T**ulsa, Oklahoma ... I've never done a show there, but I actually lived in Tulsa one summer in the 1980s," said Jeff Dunham, comedian and ventriloquist known for the antics of his dummy friends.

"It was a girl-related thing. I moved to be near a girlfriend in Broken Arrow.

"And you know, I was always the one who got dumped at the end of relationships. This was the only time I was the dumper. I got slapped."

Fond memories aside, Dunham said he's looking forward to returning to Tulsa — this time professionally — as he performs Saturday at the Brady Theater. His characters, the crotchety old man Walter, the "Muppet on heroin" Peanut and the Spanish-flavored Jose, have been seen on the "Tonight Show with Johnny Carson" and just about every cable television comedy show out there. It's an interesting life for a 33-year-old who admits it's nice to never really have to grow up.

"I don't know why I got into ventriloquism,"

Dunham said in a recent phone interview.

"When I was a kid, I just saw a dummy in a toy store and for some reason, it piqued my interest."

So much so that Dunham began performing at the ripe old age of 7 when he gave an oral book report at school using a Mortimer Snerd puppet.

By high school, he was performing at amusement parks. He managed to graduate from Baylor University while sandwiching in comedy gigs around the country.

"I knew even as a kid that I would be doing this (as a career)," Dunham said. "Even in junior high, when you have to go talk to your guidance counselor about what you're going to plan to do with your life, I knew. There was this counselor at my school, Mrs. Lutz. I think was her name. She said, 'Jeff, you're getting ready to go into high school, then college. What are your interests?'"

"And I said, 'I'm going to be a ventriloquist.' And I'll never forget what she said to me. She

looked at me and said, 'Now, Jeff, we need to be realistic.' I'd love to see Mrs. Lutz right now."

Although Dunham said his goals were clearly defined to him, his decision was hardest on his parents.

"It was toughest for them," Dunham said. "Because here I was at Baylor, a fairly prestigious university, and people would say to my parents, 'Johnny's gonna be a doctor and Suzie's studying to be a nuclear physicist. What's your son doing?' And they'd have to say I was off playing with puppets."

But those puppet shows have done very well for Dunham — probably better than Johnny-the-doctor or Suzie-the-nuclear-physicist. He became a favorite of Johnny Carson and has the distinction of being the most-invited ventriloquist on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson" and one of only four comedians that Carson invited over to the couch after their first appearance on the show.

"When I graduated from high school, I gave myself 10 years to have been on the 'Tonight Show'

at least once," Dunham said of his professional goal setting. "I first went on the 'Tonight Show' in April 1990. In June of 1990 I had my 19-year reunion."

Did he return to the reunion to gloat?

"Mayyyybeee," Dunham said with a satisfied chuckle. "I was never part of the in-crowd in high school."

Dunham said people like his shows so much because he considers himself a comedian who uses ventriloquism, not just a puppetmaster.

"I don't think the reason people come to my show is because I'm a good ventriloquist," he said, "I

think they come to my show because of the comedy and the characters. It's not just doing good tricks. If you concentrate on the comedy and the characters and what's going on there, people will come to see it over and over if it's funny."

Dunham started his professional gigs with Peanut and Walter, who remain the mainstays of his act, as well as his friends. Along the way, he's tried new dummies — some that have worked and some that haven't. His newest character, Bubba, will make an appearance in the Tulsa show.

Bubba is "just white trash from your favorite local trailer park," Dunham has said. He debuted the character earlier this year in Nashville, and was a bit nervous about it, but said it went OK because everyone in the audience thought he was talking about "the guy in the trailer next door."

"My shows are always interesting because the demographics of the crowd are so varied," Dunham said. "Older folks love Walter because they're either married to him or work for him, or he's their dad."

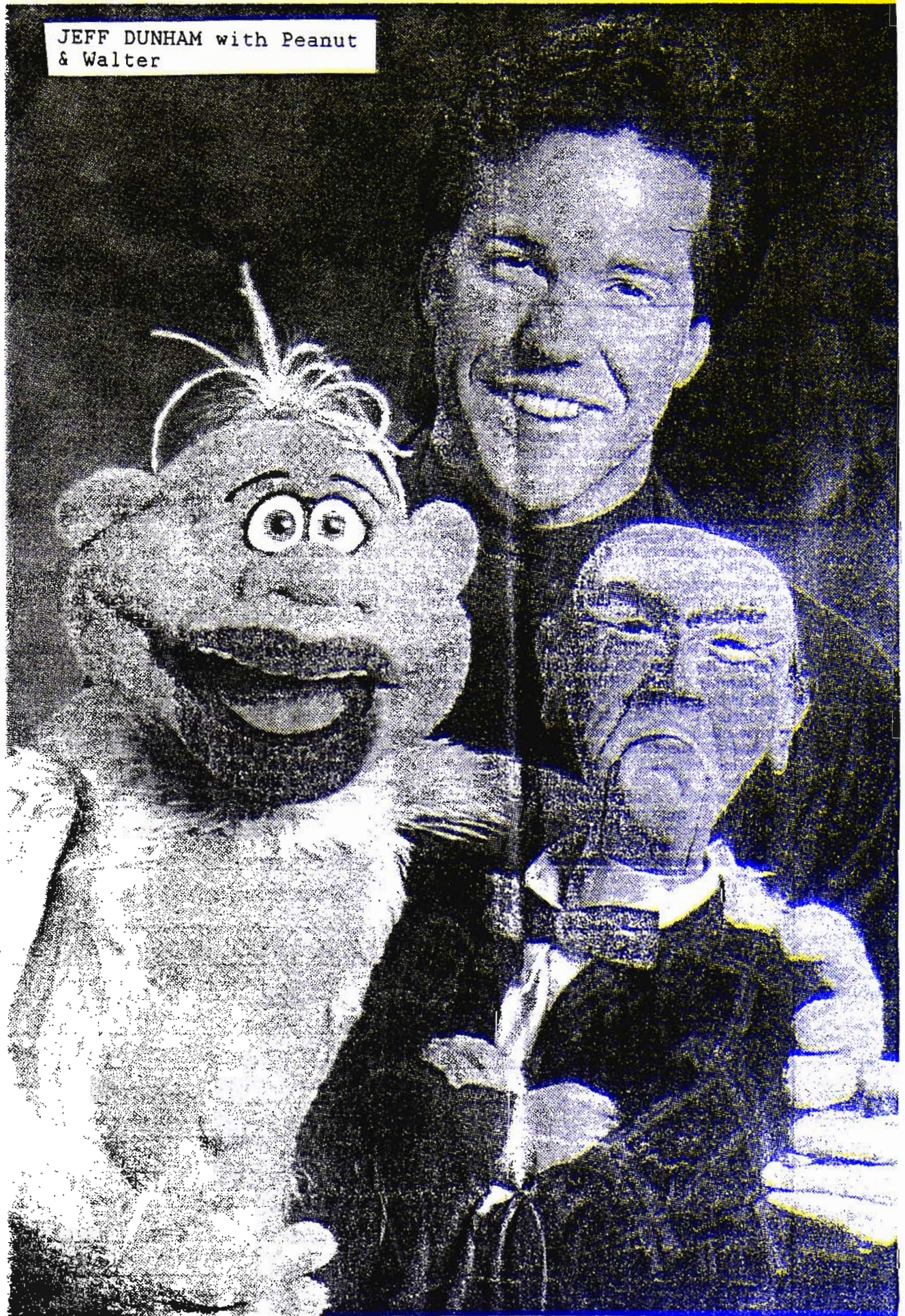
"And everyone from kids to motorcycle gangs show up for

Peanut; he's just wacky. It's weird sometimes to look out and see these long-haired guys with leather jackets and tattoos laughing along with 4- and 5-year-olds."

"There are bits in the show that I do over and over and have kept in there for years," he said. "But what keeps it interesting for me are the sections that are new. I always do a 'Dear Walter' question-and-answer session, where audience members are asked to write a question to Walter on a



JEFF DUNHAM with Peanut  
& Walter





JEFF DUNHAM

(from p. 1)

piece of paper at the beginning of the show. They are collected and I pick a few of them for Walter to answer."

Then there are those occasional really spontaneous moments that keep live entertainment well, interesting, to say the least.

"I opened for Julio Iglesias one time," Dunham said. "And I don't know if you've ever been to a Julio show, but maybe 8 percent of the crowd speaks English. And it's a real varied crowd, not just Spanish but Europeans and all the Japanese. I played that show for the busboys."

Then there was the time Dunham had a surprise guest.

"Once, after Peanut or Walter was heckling the audience, I had a midget jump out of the crowd. A little, drunk midget jumped onto a table right by me and mooned me."

Did Dunham lose his train of thought?

"Wouldn't you if a drunk midget mooned you?" he asked.

Perhaps the Brady Theatre in Tulsa could advise Norwood as to how it would be possible to contact Jeff Dunham (maybe through some booking agency).

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GEORGE WASHINGTON DUNHAM (1845-1893) (8) (Deacon John 1, Joseph 2, Nathaniel 3, Isaac 4, Calvin 5, Alpheus 6, Alpheus 7) married Lydia Jane Baker (1848-1933) on June 1, 1871. These are the photographs that adorn their marriage certificate. George W. served in the Civil War. Later he was an engineer on the Erie Canal. Their son, Henry Alpheus Dunham (1872-1946) became the grandfather of Bill Wood. After George's death, Lydia Jane married Alonzo T. Slocum. For these pictures, thanks go to Bill Wood, Stephens City, VA.

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## A RUGGED JOURNEY

WITH A ROUGH BEGINNING... Rosa Dunham Sims (1881-1952) (10) (Deacon John 1, John 2, John 3, Ebenezer 4, Ebenezer 5, Jonathan 6, Ralph 7, Francis S. 8, Samuel E. 9) told that she had never heard her father swear but once. That was on the occasion when the family was traveling from their Chicago home to the wilds of Idaho, where they hoped to develop a gold mine. The packing & all other arrangements had been made, & the couple, with their younger children, were setting off for the railroad station, to begin the first leg of a long journey. (Cont'd p. 4)





RUGGED JOURNEY (from p. 3) At the station Samuel turned to his wife & asked her for the railroad tickets, which had been been previously purchased & were in her keeping. After a bit of fumbling in her reticule, she had to admit that she didn't have them; they were back at the house. "Damn!" said Samuel. His wife's eyes bulged with shock. "MIS-ter Dunham!!" she said, strong disapproval in every syllable. He apologized quite profusely, & the party had to make another cab trip back to the house to retrieve the tickets. Whether they eventually made it to the train on time was not reported. ...THAT DIDN'T GET ANY BETTER. In going from Chicago to Lewiston, Idaho, travelers could go only so far by rail in 1895. At some point they had to leave the train & make the rest of the trip by stage coach. Maria (Sands) Dunham had always been accustomed to civilized, urban living, & she did not much care for the extremely bumpy stage coach ride. Added to that was the problem of traveling with children, who were forever asking questions -- not just the simple "Are we there yet?", but substantive questions. They always expected to get definitive answers from their mother, a lady who had won numerous medals for scholarship in her school days. Maria was near the end of her wits when one of the children inquired, "What does AMBIDEXTROUS mean?" Maria gripped the sides of the stagecoach seat as it rocked along on what SHOULD have been a road. "It means you can use either your head or your tail," she replied.

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Q U E R I E S

DR. CAROLE J. ALLEN, 4612 Mayflower Rd., Norfolk, VA 23508, is searching for the parents of Lidiyah Dunham (1704-1798), of Plympton, MA. Lidiyah married John DOTEN (1700-1750), also of Plympton. The Dotens had a son Ebenezer (1727-1786). We have found no Doten entries in our Dunham Index. Can anyone else help?

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DR. ALLEN is also looking for data on Joannah Dunham (no dates), who married Eisha WHITON/WHITTEN in 1728. He was born in 1706, & they had a daughter, Mercy Whitten or Whiting, born in Plymouth, MA in 1732. Joannah Dunham was the daughter of a John Dunham, but there is no further identifying information about him.

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WILLIAM G. BURKE, 645 Boyd St., Watertown, NY 13601, is searching for the parents of Jeremiah Dunham (1758-1833), of Sheffield, MA. Jeremiah served in the American Revolution from 1776-1784. The name of his first wife is unknown; the 2nd wife was Sally Richards, widow of William Kasson. Family tradition in this branch of the Dunham family has Jeremiah as one of 3 brothers who fought in the Am. Rev. & who had come to America in the 1750's. Mr. Burke considers that possibly the parents of Jeremiah Dunham were David Dunham ((D-1641)) & Sarah Clifford, who were married in 1723. IWD shows no son Jeremiah for this couple, & all their children were born in the 1720's & 1730's. The story of Dunham brothers who came to America in the 1750's is one that is not infrequently encountered, but no needed detail is ever included. Can anyone provide more information about this? Can anyone help William Burke to find Jeremiah Dunham's parents?

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In the January issue of DD, under the head, "Free Help," we mentioned that Nancy Honsberger had access to 6 inadequately identified photos that might be of Dunhams or Dunham connections. Now Susan Bidwell-Williams, Gilbert, AZ, has sent copies of those photos, which appear on page 5.



WE NEED A HOME!!

KATHLEEN

18 YRS OLD  
JAN 23 '07

MINNIE

DIED DEC 1 1903  
MARIAN OH

CHARLOTTE

ROBERT

The above photos were all taken at "Trowbridge" photo shop in Upper Sandusky, Oh. These people are probably relatives of David H. and Helen Dunham of Parsons Kansas and Rogers, Arkansas. Mrs. Dunham had a brother who was a patient at the Grant Hospital, Columbus, Ohio in May of 1921; his first name may have been "Tull". Mrs. Dunham was born in Ohio, but we do not have her maiden name. She was born January 6, 1838.

The Wyandot Tracers have these photos in their possession and would like to find family members who would like these pictures. They were sent to us from an estate in Arkansas. The pictures will be on display in the Tracers booth during the Wyandot County Fair September 13-18, 1994.